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The Great Debate



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The Great Debate



*A Platform Scene in the Seven Joint Discussions
between Lincoln and Douglas. One of the Relief
Pictures in the Dome of the State Capitol at
Springfield, Illinois.*

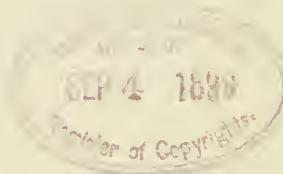


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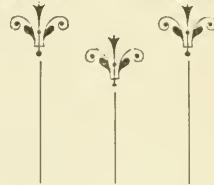
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The Great Debate

One of the Nicolai Reliefs in the dome of Illinois' Statehouse.



 **I**N this picture, so entitled by all who remember, and all who are familiar with the written history of the discussion of the question as to the restriction or extension of Slavery, in the territories of the United States, the most conspicuous advocate of the restriction policy, is standing by a table with one hand resting thereon, while the other is held in the well known position of argumentative gesture, slightly raised from the side, with the palm turned outward, seeming to say, "Is not that right, and true, and reasonable?"

Lincoln, it is said, used but that one gesture when speaking, and that movement and position of the hand was as natural when making an argument, founded on reason, as the movement of the tongue itself. Certain it is, that in none of the speeches delivered by this great reasoner, was there any deliberate attempt made at oratory merely for applause, but all of the eloquent periods came from a full and sympathetic heart. He made no effort to heighten effect by the aid of swinging arms and clapping hands; by shaking of the head and trembling voice. Calmness, earnestness, sincerity, appeals to reason and to justice, constituted his power to bring others to his view of the question. And let it be said, to the credit of a majority of the people of Illinois, that they were capable of being influenced by

right and reason, rather than by subtlety and brilliant oratory.

Lincoln's opponent is seated at the opposite side of the table (looking the physical dwarf and mental giant that he was) full of attention to what his great rival is saying, and, no doubt, endeavoring to frame replies for use when his turn shall have come to address the multitude.

Douglas' friends are grouped on his side of the table, and, while it is clearly manifest that all the faces, save one, as well as those on the Lincoln side, are intended for portraits, the writer has been unable to secure with certainty, the identity of but few of the men there seen, and all attempt to name the others is only conjecture.

The key to the whole series of pictures, or Relief Plaques, as they may be called, cannot be found, and its

loss is greatly deplored by all who appreciate the art and the history, which are shown in this beautiful work, not only as to this Lincoln-Douglas plaque, but as to each and everyone of the series, ten in number.

At the extreme right of the picture, looking out from under a draped doorway or cabinet, is the face of a colored man, who is standing in an easy position, with one hand placed on his left hip, the other stretched above his head, and resting against the door post. Why is this negro on the Douglas side, instead of on the side of his friend Lincoln?

The key would doubtless explain why. In its absence it may be surmised that, inasmuch as a then recent opinion from Chief Justice Taney, of the Supreme Court of the United States, was being used by Douglas as one of his

arguments, one of his friends in these debates, perhaps the artist, placed the wooly head and thick lips there, as an allegorical “Dred Scott” decision, or it may be that the figure with the curtain, is intended to represent the proverbial “woodpile.” At least, few visitors notice him, unless their attention is called to him.

A recent visitor, a bright lady from Warsaw, Hancock County, after hearing the above guess as to the reason for the apparent mislocation of the colored man, suggested with a mischievous smile, “Perhaps he is waiting for an order.”

Two visitors at the Statehouse who said they knew Judge Anthony Thornton of Shelbyville, expressed the opinion, that the figure seated at the right hand end of the picture, was intended to represent that great friend of the “Little Giant.”

It is well worth while to give this figure careful attention, the pose being that of a man who is forgetting everything else in the deep absorption of following the speaker's argument. He has his left arm resting on the back of the chair, the left foot drawn back under it, and his head held in a listening attitude, the face, the form, and the attitude, being most natural and lifelike.* But this is almost equally true of the entire work, there being scarcely an exception.

The faces of the two men who are standing on this, the Douglas side of the picture, are fine and strong, with such marked and distinguishing features, that they should be easily recognized by people who saw and heard the debates.

*Representative Ross of Vandalia, has, since the above was written, positively identified this face as that of Judge Thornton.

One of them is thought to resemble Wm. A. Richardson, who filled out the unexpired term of Mr. Douglas as United States Senator, excepting the short time that O. H. Browning held the position by appointment.

On the Lincoln side, and seated nearest to him, is a figure, which it is almost certain, is intended to represent Judge Stephen T. Logan. And, if so, he is properly placed, as he was very near to Lincoln, in all his political life.

Next to Logan, is a face which was thought by a lady visitor from Bloomington, to resemble "Old Ike Funk," he, who electrified the Senate, during a session of that body in which the "great war" was under discussion, by an impromptu speech that made him famous.

Standing behind this figure, is that of a patriot so well and so widely known, that few fail to recognize it, yet so

little has been said or written about this work, that the grand old man himself, did not know that he was represented in that group of great men, until his attention was called to it a short time since. After quite a prolonged examination of the picture, he handed back the opera glass, and said, "I guess you're right, I'll come again, I'll come again." He had been asked if he could identify any other of the faces in the picture. No effort was made to detain him, he was entitled to release from attendance, and to have opportunity to indulge in the thoughts that platform scene suggested, and the memories it brought back to him.

As a lawyer at the Illinois bar, as a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1847, as a State Senator, Colonel of the 14th Illinois Infantry, Major General commanding the 14th Army Corps, as Provisional Governor of

Kentucky, as Governor of Illinois, and as United States Senator, General Palmer has rendered his State and Country great and excellent service. Not only for these duties well done, but because of his prominence as a friend of Lincoln, and earnest supporter of the doctrine of opposition to the extension of slavery, is he entitled to the honor of a place by the side of the greatest of our country's great men, as he appears in this marvellous work of art.

Who else may be represented there, few have attempted to suggest. There are twenty figures in the plaque, and Matheny, Judd, Stuart, Lovejoy, Wentworth, Washburn, Browning, might have all been given places there, and some of them may be there. Could we learn who furnished the artist, F. Nicolai, with the photographs and engravings he

used, and coached him while doing the work, we might be able to identify every historic face shown in the several plates. To him, as well as to the artist, great credit is due for his selection of subjects for illustration.

It may be, the picture under consideration was intended to present the platform as it appeared at some particular one of the seven joint debates, which took place in 1858, at Ottawa, August, 21st; Freeport, August 27th; Jonesboro, September 15th; Charleston, September 18th; Galesburg, October 7th; Quincy, October 13th, and at Alton, October 15th. If so, it seems probable that the Galesburg debate was selected for this picture, as that appears to have been the most notable of the meetings.

Are there not yet some living, who can tell the names of the representative men occupying the platform with

Lincoln and Douglas, on that occasion? True it is, that forty years, just forty years at this writing, have passed since that event, but men who were thirty years of age at that time, are but seventy now, and surely there must be many still with us who can name at least one or two of the men shown on the platform.*

Within a stone's throw of this great Statehouse, stands a fine old mansion, up the walk to which, the two most conspicuous men depicted in this plate, each form and posture so true to life, passed many times. They were bent on other than political business, yet in antagonism as they always were, until November 6, 1860.

* R. R. Hitt, who the writer thinks reported these debates, would be likely to remember some of them.

Both were ambitious to attain distinction, but neither dreamed of the exalted position their forms and faces would occupy, in such a magnificent structure as the Capitol of Illinois now is, and which rears its beautiful symmetrical dome, so near the house, then the home of her, to attain whose hand was their present ambition. It was the *old* Statehouse, then quite new, but now too small for the Judicial and Administrative business of Sangamon County, whose walls were made to ring with their eloquence, and the Representative Hall, of which was made sacred by the lying-in state therein, of the remains of him whose greatest aim in life was ‘‘To take care that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, might not perish from the earth.’’

With ordinary men the continued clashing of interests would have caused an enmity so strong as to preclude even the usual amenities of acquaintance. But it was not so with these “big and little giants;” they respected each other and were friendly, even familiar in their conversation, as is illustrated by an incident related to the writer, by Judge Barge of Dixon.

On the day of the debate at Freeport, Judge Barge with a young friend, went early to the grove in which the platform for the occasion had been erected, and discussed the question as to which direction the speakers would face. A pretty brisk breeze was blowing as Lincoln and Douglas walked up the steps of the platform.

Douglas said to Lincoln, “Abe, which way shall we talk?”

“It’s hard enough to talk *with* the wind, Dug. We’d better face this way,” was Abe’s reply.

The writer had never before heard the name of Douglas abbreviated in that way, but has since learned that it was frequently so used by his intimates.

Notwithstanding the fact that Douglas sometimes became personal and quite abusive, Lincoln never lost his equanimity, and even turned the abuse of his adversary to his own advantage.

This was amusingly and strikingly done, either at this Freeport debate, or in that at Ottawa, as related by Deacon Bushnell, of Paxton, who was then living in that part of the State.

Douglas had worked himself up to such a degree of earnestness in talking of what Lincoln had said, that he

forgot his audience, turned his back to it, and, facing Lincoln, scolded and fumed until his face became almost hideous with rage. Lincoln folded his arms as evidence that he had no hostile intent, arose and moved around slowly so Douglas would follow his movement, until he brought to the view of the audience, the distorted and repulsive features, which could not fail to impress them as evidence of want of argument on his side, which such exhibitions of anger usually do.

This piece of strategy by Lincoln, was the keen act of the lawyer, who takes advantage of every opportunity afforded by opposing counsel to show him to the jury in an unfavorable light, or rather, as in this case, to let him show himself in such light.

Mr. Lincoln could say scathing things, as he did at Freeport, when he suggested that, when Douglas made the charge that he, Lincoln was responsible for certain abolition resolutions, "The evil genius that had attended him through his life, giving to him an apparent prosperity such as to lead very many good men to doubt their being any advantage in virtue over vice, had at last made up his mind to forsake him."

And, on the occasion of his Columbus, Ohio, speech in September, 1859, replying to the Harper's Magazine Article of Douglas, he said, "Douglas is so put up by nature, that a lash upon his back would hurt him, but a lash upon anybody else's back would *not* hurt him."

It requires a little reflection to grasp all this implies. When we recall the full purport of the injunction "Re-

member those in bonds, as bound with them," and how completely Mr. Douglas had failed to express any sympathy with those who were held as chattels, we will better understand the severity of Lincoln's statement.

Apparently he had no regard for suffering, if the suffering happened to be under a black skin. He was put up by nature in that way. Mr. Lincoln was put up in another way, hence these "Great Debates," which made such history, that they will never pass into oblivion, even though this great dome of steel and stone in which they are commemorated, may crumble into dust.

But, as was intimated, there came a change after the election in November, 1860. Douglas holding the hat of Lincoln during the delivery of his first inaugural address; Douglas advising with Lincoln, and suggesting that troops

could be got into Washington through Annapolis, instead of through hostile Baltimore; Douglas asserting that "there are but two parties now, patriots and traitors," had truly "sunk the partisan in the patriot," had forgotten himself and his ambition, in his loyalty to the Union.

All the good he did has not been written, he not only saw himself that there was a deliberate design to break up this Government, but he helped others to see it also.

An incident has been related to the writer, showing his usefulness in this direction, which, while it may not be true to the letter, it is highly probable that it is correct in substance.

When Douglas was in Springfield, after the called Session of the Senate had adjourned, in the Spring of 1861, he was met on the square near the old Statehouse, by John

A. Logan, who immediately commenced to rail at him for his treason to their party. Those who know Logan's fiery nature, and the *richness* of his vocabulary, can easily imagine that it was no Sunday School style of address he used in upbraiding his great leader. Douglas heard him in silence for a while, then, taking him by the arm said, "Come in here, John," and led him into a room of the Capitol, where they were closeted for an hour or more. When they came out Logan's eyes were wet. In that interview, the particulars of which will never be known, except so far as its results appear, Logan like Saul, "had seen the light and heard the voice." And thenceforth to his everlasting honor be it said, he was "among the 'greatest of the Apostles' of Liberty and Union."

The incident, if true, is greatly to the credit of both men and adds another to the momentous historical events which have taken place in the old Statehouse, which, let it not be forgotten, Lincoln was so largely instrumental in placing where it stands. Surely they cannot be acquainted with its history, who favor tearing it down.

The death of the great Senator, was a serious loss to the Union side. His influence would have gone far towards minimizing the harm done by the "Knights of the Golden Circle" and "Sons of Liberty," who were striving to perpetuate *oppression*, and his magnetism and fervor would have brought to the Union ranks, many who remained neutral, or went over to the side of the enemy.

Because of his greatness and his steadfastness for the Union, is he fully entitled to the respect and honor shown

by placing him conspicuously in the picture, which, the writer ventures to predict, will yet be ranked as one of the world's great works of art.

To the memory of the artist who has so beautifully commemorated the greatest debate in all history,* there should be at least a tablet of bronze placed in the rotunda, in a prominent position, and near his great work. For it is because of the excellence of his work, as well as the history it records, which is not only Illinois', but the Country's also; that we would not exchange our Capitol's dome for Michael Angelo's art embellished crown of St. Peters at Rome. There is no Lincoln there.

* Since the above was written, President McKinley said, in speaking of Lincoln and Douglas, in his address to the citizens of Kankakee, Oct. 15, 1898, "Their famous debate was an education for the young man and for the old men of the country, and had as much to do with shaping and moulding public opinion, as any event I can now recall."



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